

As Election Begins, "Iraq is Ready," U.S. Says

By Steve Kaufman

Washington -- Voting in Iraq is already underway for voters such as hospital patients, prisoners, and security personnel who will be on duty for the main March 7 election. The State Department says so far the process is going well, despite a handful of security incidents that affected three voting centers.

"Iraq is ready, and we think they'll be able to protect their citizens as they go to the polls on Sunday," Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley said March 5. The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad has reported that Iraq's security forces and election officials seem well prepared "and the voters enthusiastic," Crowley added.

The security incidents that have occurred have "failed to deter the determination" of those Iraqis who have been eligible to vote early, he said.

Iraqis are voting for a four year parliament in the country's second national election since the Ba'athist regime led by Saddam Hussein was toppled by U.S. and international forces in 2003.

In the run up to the election, "[e]very community seems to have been fully ... participating in the campaign," Crowley said. "We think that is very encouraging."

The U.S. Senate unanimously passed a bipartisan resolution March 4 recognizing the significance of the election and reconfirming the U.S. commitment to building "a robust, long-term partnership with Iraq that strengthens Iraq's security, stability, economy, and democracy." The resolution also commends the Iraqi people for "the courage they have shown; the sacrifices they have endured; and the hard-won gains they have made in fighting terrorism, finding peace, and building democracy."

With all U.S. combat troops on schedule to withdraw from Iraq by the end of August, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry said Iraq is entering "a new phase" in its political life.

"America's involvement in Iraq will change, but our commitment to the people of Iraq will not end. We are sending a strong bipartisan message that America remains deeply invested in Iraq's stability, democracy, and well-being," Kerry said.

General David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) told PBS Television's Charlie Rose March 3 that if all goes well, the election will result in a government that represents and is responsive to all of Iraq's sectarian and ethnic communities.

"You'll have as a result ... the new parliament, the new council of representatives. And then you'll have the next election, in a sense. And that will be the cobbling together of a coalition that will have to be made up of not just Shi'a, the majority sect, but also Sunni; and not just Arab but also Kurd," Petraeus said.

The communities have learned the lesson of how sectarian violence "tore the fabric of society" in 2006 and 2007 and know they will need to cooperate on a political level in order to form the next government.

“There's no way you can get the number of votes required to select that next prime minister, president, speaker of the council of representatives, and probably a package deal that includes some key ministers, without getting a cross-ethnic, cross-sectarian coalition of votes,” he said.

The new government will be tasked with lingering issues such how power and oil revenues are to be shared between the communities, but Petraeus praised Iraq's potential for success.

The Iraqi population is “well educated, is entrepreneurial, will go out and they're go-getters. So the potential is enormous. But it's enormous only if the people continue to work together. As we used to say, it's okay to shout, just don't shoot,” he said.